An Integrative Review of
the Literature Pertinent to

Custody for Children

Five Years of Age and Younger

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Decisions about parenting arrangements for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers during and following divorce present important challenges for parents and persons affiliated with the courts. There exists little empirical research directly on point to guide these decisions. We do know, however, that (1) children need to maintain strong, lasting attachments to both parents at a time when former spouses need to maintain a comfortable distance from one another, (2) chronic or intense interparental conflict is deleterious to children's adjustment, (3) children need protection from abuse and neglect, (4) a postdivorce coparental alliance characterized by cooperation and mutual support is associated with positive child outcomes, and (5) children whose parents divorce are at serious risk for economic disadvantage, which also places their psychosocial adjustment at risk.

This report is an attempt to summarize the state of present knowledge concerning the developmental consequences of postdivorce custody arrangements for young children. We will review our knowledge about those factors that increase risk for children and those factors that increase the chance of effective family functioning. In addition, we will identify directions for future research, and will suggest some of the specific implications of our findings for family court professionals.

Method

There were four phases of data-gathering in the preparation of this report: (1) interviews with court personnel; (2) search of the scholarly and professional literature; (3) summary of the literature relevant to custody of children age 5 years and younger after divorce; and (4) performance of a meta-analysis of 12 studies reported in the literature.

Interviews with Persons Affiliated with the Courts

We conducted semi-structured interviews, one to two hours in length, with 11 men and women currently employed in various capacities in the State of California judicial system. The interviews were conducted to identify some of the more important issues regarding parenting arrangements for young children of divorcing families. The

practitioners raised questions concerning a range of issues, including parental access and parental conflict after divorce.

Search of the Scholarly and Professional Literatures

We searched the scholarly and professional literature to locate (1) articles published from 1970 through 1993 about children who experienced parental divorce or separation by age 5; and (2) articles containing relevant subject matter, published from 1985 through 1993, on the developmental needs of young children in married families.

Summary of Literature

We reviewed and summarized the existing literature relevant to the topic of custody arrangements for children 5 years of age and younger. The summary comprises the bulk of this report.

Meta-analysis

We employed the technique of model-driven meta-analysis (Becker, 1989) to synthesize results from a group of studies found in the literature that reported empirical data directly relevant to the young child's adjustment in the context of key factors in the postdivorce parenting environment. To be included in the meta-analysis, the study had to meet the following criteria:

(1) A measure of either father's contact with the child or the quality of interaction between parents was included and was correlated with at least one other variable in our model.

(2) Subject families included children who were age six or younger at the time of data collection and had experienced divorce before age 5.

(3) Data for this specific age group were available either in a published article or from the author.

(4) Zero-order correlations between variables were available either in the published report or directly from the author.

In the pool of 131 articles with information on children who had experienced parental separation by age 5 years that had reported results for this age group separately,

only 12 studies met all 4 criteria. For this set of studies we asked: How variable are the findings across studies and are there any patterns that are strong and consistent? Our synthesis of results from the individual studies allowed us to go beyond a mere summary of the studies.

Overview: Perspectives, Models, and the State of the Research Literature

Perspectives and Models

In our reading of the research literature and our interviews with practitioners we found important differences in the assumptions underlying discussions about the needs of young children. We discuss these diverse perspectives in terms of three general models of parental roles following divorce.

One model is based on the assumption that very young children need a primary and stable attachment to their mother—one primary parent, one bed to sleep in. The relationship with mother is seen as critical, the father is peripheral. This approach leads policymakers and researchers to examine carefully the effects on the young child of regular separations from mothers. Research has assessed the effects infant and toddler daycare experience and of full- and part-time maternal employment on the young child's adjustment, as well as the various factors affecting attachment in married families. The research questions are then based on a deficit model: looking for negative effects of regular separations from mothers. Time with fathers, particularly overnights, is seen as time away from mothers.

A second model places great importance on children having a father or father figure in the household. This emphasis has spawned a host of research studies which compare children growing up in households with both biological parents, with those whose primary residence does not include the biological father. This looks for the positive effects of father visits and the negative effects of father absence.

A third model takes a family systems perspective and looks at the full network of relationships surrounding the child. The assumption is that the functioning of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers with their children are all significantly interrelated. It is assumed that the coparental relationship and the role of extended family members continue

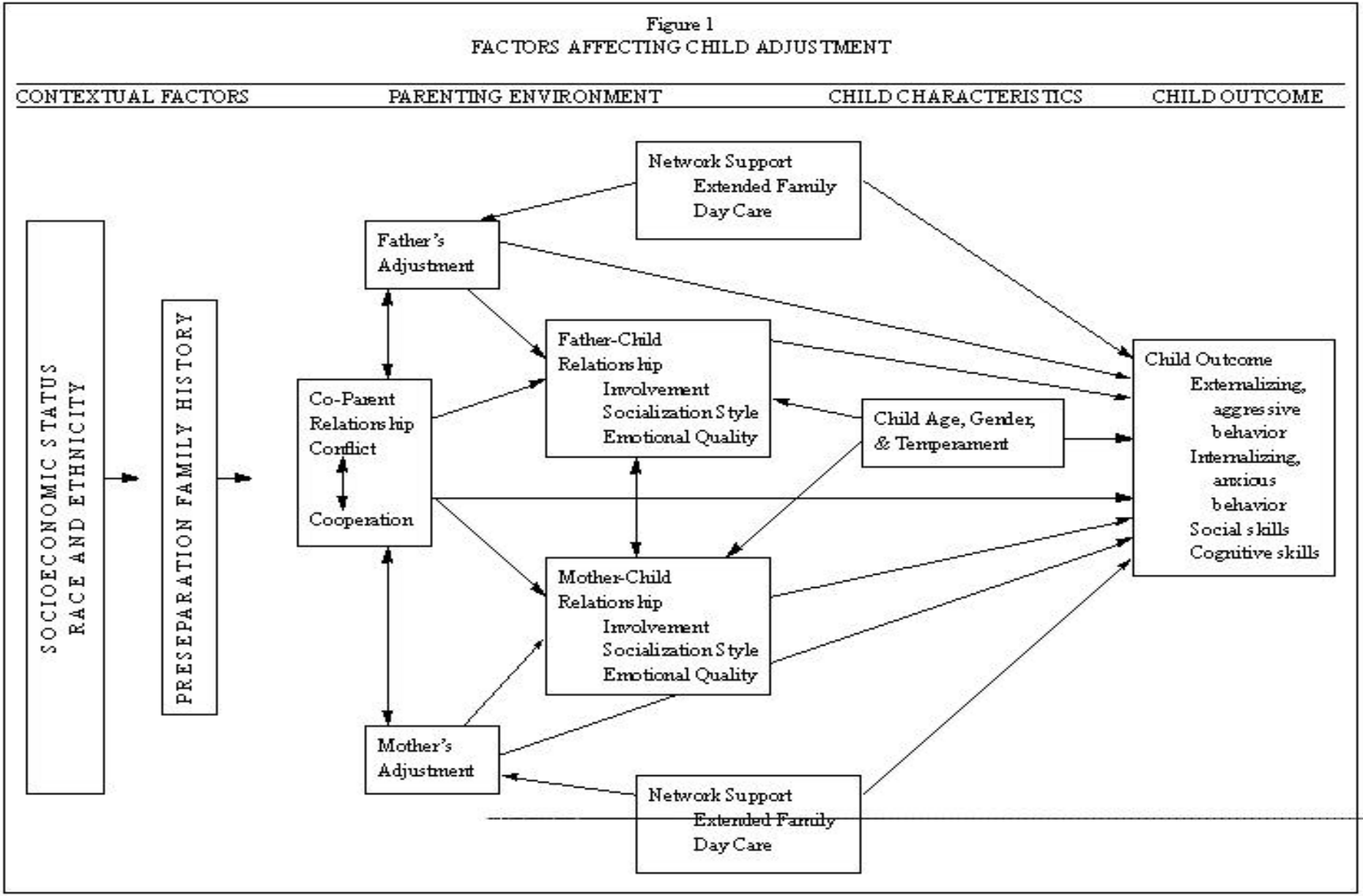
to be influential despite parental separation. As researchers have become increasingly sensitive to the full network of relationships surrounding the young child, they have begun to examine the developing parental alliance in young married families, the effects of parental conflict on family members, and the roles of extended family members (Belsky, 1984; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Guidubaldi, 1988; Rutter, 1984). Investigations are focusing on the multiple transitions associated with divorce and remarriage and the interactions of these factors with diverse family structures (Bray & Berger, 1993; Clingempeel et al., 1988; Hetherington, 1989; Kelly, 1988; Tschann et al., 1989).

Our discussions with the court practitioners and our review of the relevant research and theoretical literature lead us to propose a developmental-ecological model which we believe illustrates the potential *interactions* among the key variables that have an impact on the adjustment of young children after divorce. In developing this model, our goal was to take into account the range of factors and concerns raised by the three different perspectives just reviewed.

The arrows in Figure 1 represent the relationships among the key variables. Changes in a problematic direction in any of these factors lead to an increase in risk of child maladjustment following divorce. Variables can have a direct influence on child outcome, or an indirect influence, through their relationship to mediating variables. Some variables have both direct and indirect effects.

Factors in the *social context,* such as socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity, affect the child by way of their influence on the parental environment, on the resources available, and in their impact on the structure of the child's community environment. The *preseparation family history* includes early parenting relationships, parental availability and adjustment, and the relationships between parents and among the extended family members.

Figure 1
FACTORS AFFECTING CHILD ADJUSTMENT



Parents and other caregivers constitute the *parenting environment*, which is at the core of the young child's world. There is a web of interactions affecting the child, including levels of parental involvement with the child and the emotional quality and parenting styles characterizing the relationships. The relationships among the caregivers also affect the parenting environment, as does the psychological adjustment of each caregiver, and the caregivers' abilities to see beyond their own needs and put the child's needs first.

Child characteristics include developmental, gender, temperamental, and individual differences. The child's needs, skills, and unique characteristics will interact with the parenting environment variables.

The Research Literature

The body of literature available in the 1980's and early 1990's about parenting arrangements for children age 5 and younger includes both substantial wisdom and substantial limitations. Studies examining the experience of divorcing families with infants and toddlers are scarce. More studies have included preschool children, but they usually contain only limited information about fathers. Knowledge about the normal developmental milestones for children in married families is very well established. Much more limited, however, is the examination of children's developmental progress, in the context of the larger family system, with attention to the contributions of both fathers and mothers.

Ideas about what is important for children and about men's and women's roles have heavily influenced the types of questions asked about divorcing families and mothers' and fathers' relationships with their children. The past decades of research in developmental psychology have shown increased recognition of the role of fathers in children's development and the importance of the family system as a context for both mothers' and fathers' parenting. In addition, the idealization of the white, nuclear, middle-class family structure has given way to an acknowledgment of the diversity of community contexts, resulting in respect for different family forms. These changes are gradually finding their way into the design of studies more relevant to current family life. Thus while most earlier

studies employed simple cause-and-effect models using dyadic, gender-stereotyped concepts of parenting, some recent studies employ models considering the interaction of family members in context. These recent studies have provided valuable information about risk factors and positive supports for children (see, e.g., Ahrons & Miller, 1993; Braver et al., 1991, 1993; Bray & Berger, 1990, 1993; Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Hetherington, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Miller et al., 1993).

The conduct of empirical research with divorcing families is typically quite challenging. Obtaining samples that are sufficiently large and representative of the range of divorcing families to yield meaningful results can be very difficult. Prospective subjects are in the midst of a stressful, unstable period of transition. Often findings will be limited in generalizability because of small samples or an overrepresentation of high-conflict families. Researchers are further challenged by the task of finding or developing measures of child psychological adjustment that will be reliable and valid over the time span of the study, which may include the children's infancy and toddler years, as well as later years. The assessment of parental interactions continues to require much careful attention. In addition, researchers must familiarize themselves with the real-world workings of the family court, including the questions and concerns of court-affiliated practitioners, who deal with divorcing families on a day-to-day basis.

Despite the limitations of the existing research relevant to the subject matter of this report, certain findings emerged clearly and consistently, allowing us to draw several sets of conclusions, which we will review below. Other findings are less thoroughly examined and we will review those here as well. Furthermore, the techniques of model-driven meta-analysis have allowed us to combine the findings of several studies to underscore the strength of certain emerging patterns and to suggest productive areas needing further research.

Major Findings

In general, the majority of children from divorced families fall within the normal range on measures of psychological and cognitive functioning. Some young children,

however, do experience difficulties ranging from temporary upset and distress to persistent, serious interference in developmental progress. We have used the framework of a developmental-ecological model to discuss the risks to the young child's adjustment and the supports for healthy development. That is, we focused upon the *interaction* of a multiplicity of factors that affect each child's outcome, including the child's age, gender and temperament; each parent's psychological functioning; the various relationships among the parents, children, and extended family members; the family's race, ethnic background, and socioeconomic level; and a range of extrafamilial variables, such as the nature and quality of parental employment and of daycare arrangements. We believe that these factors interact in complex ways to result in particular psychological outcomes for children following parental separation.

Socioeconomic Factors

Children living in homes without both biological parents are at serious risk for economic disadvantage. This is true regardless of race, ethnicity, or parental educational level. If the child's residential parent has not remarried, the economic resources of that household are seriously compromised even if the preseparation income level was adequate. This economic reality can affect the child's adjustment indirectly, through the emotional stress experienced by the residential parent, and directly, through the limitation of resources available to the child (Hernandez, 1988; Teachman & Paasch, 1994; Weitzman, 1985).

Children age 5 and under whose parents divorce may be at greater risk for long-term economic hardship than are their older peers. Parents with younger children are themselves more likely to be younger, and will therefore have had fewer years to advance in their careers and obtain an education, resulting in lower incomes and less accumulation of property. Because of the association of many risk factors with the likelihood of early parental separation, these children may come into the separation period already at a disadvantage (Aylward, 1992; Hannan & Luster, 1991; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Menaghan & Parcel, 1991). In addition, they face the compounding over time of the effects of

stressors (e.g., inadequate economic resources, multiple changes in household membership, and continuing conflict between parents) on them and their parents.

Household/Family Structure —The Multicaregiver Model

There are many models of childrearing that are viable alternatives to the nuclear two-parent (mother—father dyad) household that characterize the traditional white family structure in the United States (Coll, 1990; Jackson, 1993; McGurk et al, 1993; Tronick et al, 1992). Because families stabilize into a variety of household configurations following parental separation, when considering parenting arrangements we must include a number of different family constellations, each with their own dynamics, access to resources, and significant stressors. Although much of the research examining the effect of multicaregiver family constellations has not focused on divorce, findings do reveal that young children can form positive relationships and bonds with numerous caregivers as long as they are available, responsive, and consistent. As such, this research has important implications for postdivorce parenting arrangements. It underscores the feasibility of postdivorce two-household parenting arrangements, of single-parent households, and of networks of care that include the parents, extended family members, and daycare professionals. Of course, for any of these arrangements to succeed, other factors in the children's lives, such as the relationships between the caregiving adults, and the parent-child relationships, also must be positive. Children can do well or poorly in a variety of household configurations, depending upon a range of variables. Although there is no research available on infant and toddler parental attachment in the divorcing family, we would predict that securely attached young children whose parents provide sensitive, responsive, and protective parenting will develop normally in a two-household environment. Infants and toddlers who enter the separation period with insecure attachments may have much more difficulty coping with the extra stress, may have less assistance from either parent in the process, and may be at risk for long-term difficulties.

In most families, the economic necessity of both parents being employed postdivorce, increases a child's likelihood of being cared for by extended family members or childcare professionals. The nature, quality, and consistency of the daycare arrangements, therefore, are additional factors affecting the children's well-being. We

know from research with married families with infants and toddlers that the quality of the family relationships and of the daycare are more important to the child's healthy adjustment than are the number of hours spent away from the family (Crockenerg & Liltman, 1991; Scarr & Eisenberg, 1993; Schachere, 1990). We know very little, however, about the ways in which nonparental daycare is integrated into the schedule of time with father and time with mother for the young child after divorce. A majority of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in full-time daycare show normal developmental progress and secure attachments to their mothers (Belsky, 1990; Lamb & Sternberg, 1990; Scarr & Eisenberg, 1993). Rather, factors such as the number of changes in the daycare provider, the mother's belief systems about the maternal role and the role of other caregivers, the type of employment held by the mothers, the level of parental stress, and the child's temperament are associated with the child's adjustment in both divorced and married families (Benn, 1986; Shuster, 1993; Howes & Stewart, 1987; Poteat et al, 1992).

The Parent-Child Relationships

It is the lucky child who can benefit from nurturing and enduring relationships with both parents. Yet, in the absence of one parent, children can still function well, if other factors support healthy development. For example, despite the fact that single mothers generally experience more stress than do married mothers, most children who live consistently throughout their childhood in a single-mother household do not show more problem behaviors than do other children (Baydar, 1988).

Research has helped us discard myths that devalued fathers' roles as caregivers for their children (Lamb, 1986; Radin, 1982; Russell, 1986; Russell & Radojevic, 1992). We now know that gender, per se, does not limit a parent's ability to create a safe and nurturing environment for children, nor does it correlate with adequacy in performing the tasks necessary for raising children (such as feeding, bathing, or caring for children when ill). This research underscores that the characteristics making each parent valuable to his or her child's development are not gender-specific (Hanson, 1985; Lamb, 1986; McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1987; Richards & Goldenberg, 1986). Rather, the child's interactions with a parent, as well as the dynamics of the family, determine the quality of

each parent-child relationship. Both mothers and fathers can promote their children's psychosocial adjustment and achievement with warmth, closeness, and positive involvement. Good parent-child relationships are related to young children's socialization skills, cognitive development, self-control, and the presence or absence of behavior problems whether parents are married or divorced (Belsky, 1984; Camara & Resnick, 1988; Hetherington, 1991; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989). Furthermore, the relationship between the parents is particularly critical to the family emotional climate and the effectiveness of each parent in the childrearing role.

We should note, however, that the very strong gender-based expectations about fathers' and mothers' roles and responsibilities in the United States often help create a highly uneven division of childcare labor between parents. Men often have much less direct experience, familiarity, and competence than do women with the tasks that characterize the everyday care of their children. Thus, this socially determined division of labor typically is carried over into postdivorce division of childcare responsibilities, even in joint residential custody arrangements. The divorced parents may find it difficult to abandon the more traditional gender-role expectations of themselves and their former spouses. These expectations influence not only the responsibilities taken on by divorced parents, but also the way mothers and fathers may think of themselves. For example, a mother participating in joint residential custody may have doubts about whether her children spending nights and days away from her is appropriate, given her conceptualizations of a mother's role. A father in the same family may have concerns about his ability to perform certain caregiving tasks. These expectations may color what a parent is comfortable with, as well as how each parent functions in, and evaluates the effectiveness of, various parenting arrangements.

Several findings emerged across studies that relate the child's adjustment to the relationship with each parent:

(1) The quality of the parent-child relationship, including both the emotional tone (such as, whether the parent is warm and sensitive or irritable and disinterested) and the socialization style (such as, whether a parent is authoritative or authoritarian in discipline), is very important to the child's postdivorce adjustment (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Hodges,

1983; MacKinnon, 1989; Tschann et al., 1989). This is true for both the mother-child relationship and the father-child relationship. Children who experience warm and firm parenting do better than those experiencing overly strict, indulgent, or neglectful parenting styles (Guidubaldi, Perry, & Nastasi, 1987; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982; Machida & Holloway, 1991; Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chan, 1993).

(2) Not surprisingly, the psychological adjustment of the *parents* postdivorce has implications for their relationships with their children, and thus, in turn, for the children's psychological adjustment (Braver et al, 1993; Goldberg et al , 1992; Olson et al, 1994; Tschann et al., 1989). Mothers with higher levels of postdivorce psychological symptomatology may be more critical of, punitive toward, and less involved with, their young children than are their better-adjusted peers (Barrett et al, 1991; Goodman & Brumley, 1990; Hetherington, 1989; Guidubaldi et al, 1986). Although there has been less empirical attention focused on fathers' postdivorce functioning, research suggests that those fathers experiencing significant levels of psychological distress (e.g., depression and anxiety) are less likely to have frequent contact with their children than are higher functioning fathers (Arditti, 1992a; Braver et al, 1993; Dudley, 1991b; Hetherington et al, 1982). Directions of causality are (a) not known (for example, does the depression *lead* to withdrawal from the children or does the depression *follow* lessened contact with the children), and (b) are more likely to be interactional and multi-determined than linear and unidimensional.

(3) For a parent to share meaningful responsibilities for child management and socialization, day-to-day involvement in childcare and family work is required. Consequently, a nonresidential parent, usually the father, risks becoming an increasingly peripheral parent (Braver et al, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990; Selzer, 1991).

(4) When children have a primary residence with their mother, the frequency of their father's visitation alone is not strongly related to the children's adjustment (Bray & Berger, 1990; Hodges et al, 1991; Issacs, 1988; Kline et al, 1989). However, frequency of visitation is often associated with a better father-child relationship, which, in turn, is associated with better child adjustment (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Braver et al, 1993;

MacKinnon, 1989). That is, simply having possession of the child during part of the month is neither positive or negative in its own right. Rather, it is what *transpires* between the father and the child during that time that can influence the child's adjustment. Fathers who were high in their level of preseparation involvement with the child were generally also high in frequency of time spent with the child postseparation and on measures of the father-child relationship quality. Even if a father had low preseparation involvement, increased involvement following divorce is associated with good father-child relationships. Other indicators of positive commitment to the fathering role, such as *regularity* of visitation, were also related to positive child adjustment (Hodges et al, 1991; Issacs, 1988).

The Parental Alliance

Our findings underscore the complex and multifaceted relationships among the many variables contributing to a child's adjustment after parental divorce. For example, we find both mother's and father's level of adjustment and relationship with the child are affected by the level of conflict and cooperation between the parents, and that positive mother-child relationships tend to be associated with positive father-child relationships (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Braver et al, 1993; Camara & Resnick, 1988; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). As important as the individual findings is our awareness that these variables are interconnected in complex ways and that looking at only a piece of the puzzle may not give an accurate or complete picture. Studies that have examined a broad sampling of families on measures of their overall quality of coparental relationship have found that over half of divorcing families can be categorized as cooperative, approximately one-fifth as mid-range, and approximately one-fourth to one-fifth as conflicted (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Fishel, 1987; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Masheter, 1991). Thus, there is reason *both* for concern about substantial continuing friction between parents *and* for the expectation that a majority of parents can remain supportive of one another following divorce.

Parental Conflict

(1) In those situations where hostile conflict between parents pervades the postdivorce parenting environment, there are significant risks to the child's well-being (Amato & Keith, 1991; Depner, Leino & Chun, 1992; Reid & Crisafulli, 1989; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Such conflict is associated with a tense and upsetting emotional climate, with parental depression, with lack of parental self-control, with parental modeling of blame and attack, and with generally less effective discipline practices (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Gottman & Katz, 1993; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). In addition, conflict is associated with less frequent father-child contact and poorer relationships for the child with both parents (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Braver et al, 1993). Conflict between parents is related to increased instances of child externalizing symptoms (e.g., irritability, disobedience, aggression), and deficits in social and cognitive skills. Even when the frequency of father visitation is low, continuing hostility between parents has a negative effect on the child.

(2) Parental conflict is most detrimental to children in a divorce situation if it is emotionally hostile (as contrasted with simple disagreements), verbally or physically aggressive, not resolved over time, and if the children are exposed to its expression or are the subject matter of the disputes (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Dadds & Powell, 1991; Johnston & Campbell, 1993; Jouriles et al, 1991). Particularly harmful to children's adjustment is the experience of being "caught in the middle" of their parents' struggles (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991; Hetherington et al., 1982; Johnston & Campbell, 1988).

Parental Cooperation

(1) Cooperation between parents postdivorce includes frequent communication about the child; coordination of routines across households; the ability to resolve differences in a mutually satisfactory manner; and respect for and support of the other parent's relationship with the child. Such positive interactions facilitate warm and sensitive parenting, bolster parental self-esteem, and are associated with an authoritative discipline style (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Camara & Resnick, 1988; Fishel & Scanzoni,

1989; Kelly, Gigy & Hausman, 1988). Cooperation is associated with children who have good social and cognitive functioning, and appears to buffer children against depression and anxiety (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Camara & Resnick, 1988; Fishel & Scanzoni, 1989; Kelly, Gigy, & Hausman, 1988). A cooperative emotional atmosphere and effective resolution of differences between parents also is associated with higher levels of parental functioning. Further, after parents separate, the mother's support and encouragement of the father's involvement is significantly related to frequency of father visitation, degree of father involvement in child-related activities, and the quality of the father-child relationship (Braver et al, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Guidubaldi et al, 1986).

(2) Cooperative postdivorce parenting is complex and challenging for most divorcing parents, perhaps even more so for young parents, who have had less time to build their parental alliance and may have more questions about the other parent's caregiving abilities. Some couples separate with conflict, but over the course of two to three years learn to encapsulate that conflict and develop a zone of constructive parental behavior, separating their pain and hostility from their roles as parents (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Steinman, Zemmelman & Knoblauch, 1985). Parents are least likely to develop a cooperative postdivorce relationship if there was a high level of hostile conflict predivorce, if they do not respect each other and question each other's parental competence (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) or if domestic violence characterized the predivorce relationship (Johnston & Campbell, 1993; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990).

Avenues for Further Research

The Relationships Among Family Members Postdivorce

Researchers have only just begun to scratch the surface in building our knowledge base about the characteristics of fathers, coparental relationships, and extended-family relationships that affect the postdivorce adjustment of infants, toddlers and preschoolers, as well as the interaction among these variables. Consistent with research trends in the past two decades, we need to expand our focus beyond what goes *wrong* in families whose children develop adjustment difficulties to better understand what goes *right* in

families whose children do well. Furthermore, research designs sensitive to the social ecologies in which children develop must broaden the definition of the family to include extended family members and daycare providers who have an impact on the children's and parents' lives. Those factors that impact children's postdivorce adjustment are extremely complex, with multiple determinants. Therefore, we also need to bring to this research the increasingly sophisticated methodological and statistical approaches that allow us to look at the *multiplicity* of factors that interact with each other to lead to a particular result.

Examining Cultural and Ethnic Differences

Divorcing families reflect a microcosm of our society, and thus are characterized by great diversity in cultural, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Very little empirical work has been conducted identifying the different ways that families from various backgrounds experience and cope with divorce. We must insure that our research samples include persons of nonmajority backgrounds, and that we attend to factors that may be particularly salient in understanding the divorce experience from perspectives other than those characterizing the white, middle-class American family.

Promoting Positive Postdivorce Father-Child Relationships

Given that positive, close father-child relationships appear to benefit children (and fathers) postdivorce, and in light of the data indicating that many children experience loss of or diminution in their contacts with their fathers postdivorce, an important area for future research is examining the factors that promote positive and close postdivorce father-child relationships. As part of these investigations, we need elucidation about the nature, incidence and effects of the range of postdivorce father-child relationships that now characterize divorced families. How do factors such as the father's level of stress; his support network; his discipline style; and the degree of cognitive stimulation in his home environment relate to child adjustment?

Promoting Coparental Cooperation and Reducing Coparental Conflict

The parental alliance in divorcing families with young children need to be examined using measures that distinguish among the various dimensions of the complex constructs of "cooperation" and "conflict." What factors or interventions help to increase cooperation and decrease conflict? How does parental cooperation and conflict relate to mother's and father's personal adjustment, their disciplinary styles, and their ability to be warm and sensitive to the child's needs?

Extended Family Relationships

Although studies document the high involvement of grandparents in the lives of young children of divorced parents, few studies have investigated different patterns of extended family help for the youngest children following divorce. What types of interactions facilitate or hinder effective parenting by mothers and fathers?

Daycare Arrangements After Divorce

The special issues relating to daycare also deserve attention. We know from research with married families with young children that the quality and consistency of a child's daycare environment is important in determining whether that experience benefits the child or puts the child at risk. However, we know very little about the ways in which nonparental daycare is integrated effectively into the schedule of time with father and mother for the young child after divorce. What are the most beneficial strategies parents have found to balance needs for both parents to be employed and for both parents to spend substantial time with their children? What are the circumstances in which the child becomes stressed by too many settings and transitions?

Postdivorce Parenting Arrangements for Infants and Toddlers

We know very little about postdivorce parenting arrangements for infants and toddlers specifically. Building and maintaining close relationships *with* parents after divorce may be most challenging in these years. How can families promote such relationships while possibly also reducing the stress and burdens experienced by each parent? How can divorced parents help their very young children master the

developmental challenges characterizing these periods? What characteristics of father-child interactions, mother-child interactions, and the parental alliance promote secure attachments to both parents?

Overnights with Nonresidential Parents

There is practically no research examining the impact of overnights with the nonresidential parent for children in these age groups. Whereas commentators (e.g., Hodges, 1991; Kalter, 1990) do not voice concerns about overnights away from the primary caregiver when the children are age 3 or older, these writers express concerns about overnights for children under age 3. In light of Maccoby and Mnookin's (1992) findings that over 40 percent of children age 3 and younger do spend overnights with their fathers, *and* that those children in this age range who do *not* have such overnights are highly likely to lose contact with their fathers within three years, empirical research on this subject is extremely important. We need to examine under what conditions and circumstances overnights for infants and toddlers with a nonresidential parent are problematic or beneficial for the children.

Long-Term Impact on Children of Postdivorce Parenting Arrangements

We need to extend our investigations to examine the long-term impact on children of parenting arrangements established early in life, as well as the changes in these arrangements that occur over time (such as moves, remarriages). In addition, we should open the time frame to examine the adjustment of these children (ages 5 and under at the time of separation or divorce) as the children reach later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It is possible that some of the impacts of earlier experiences may not be evident until the later years (Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1993).

Implications for Practitioners

The review of the available research data shows a wide variety of successful two-household parenting arrangements for children age 5 and younger. We also see a well-documented, serious impact on children when their caregivers are not working in an

effective manner to meet their needs. It is not the shape of the caregiving network, nor the time sharing schedule that has the most potent effect on children's development. Rather, it is the quality of the parental alliance and the parents' warmth, sensitivity, and discipline style that make the difference between a well-adjusted child and one who is angry, scared, or limited in cognitive and social skills.

Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers with separated parents can form secure and enduring attachments within a caregiving system characterized by the involvement of multiple caregivers including, for example, mother, father, extended family members, and daycare professionals. In order for such a system to work to the child's benefit, several criteria should be met. First, the caregivers' interactions with the children must be predictable, responsive, affectionate, and warm. Second, the children *need sufficient time* with each of the primary caregivers on a regular basis to establish a close bond. Third, children are likely to adjust better if the parenting styles exhibited by the adults are more *authoritative* (that is, firm with clear limit-setting, while responsive and empathic), rather than authoritarian, punitive, indulgent or neglectful. Fourth, one or more caregivers must perform the *executive* functions of coordination among the different parts of the system. It may be useful in mediation or counseling to discuss with parents strategies for coaching extended family members and other caregivers to act supportively, rather than in ways that take sides and encourage splits.

It is important to establish a transition process in the early separation period that facilitates a positive transfer of childcare responsibilities between caregivers and which reinforces the competent caregiving of both parents, as well as other caregivers. Family court professionals can promote children's postdivorce adjustment by helping family members develop plans for caregiving systems that maximize the likelihood of success according to the criteria reviewed above. Family members, typically overwhelmed at this time in their lives, will probably require assistance in identifying what their children need from them, and how they can parent most sensitively and effectively within their new family structure.

Positive Parenting

For families who show a constellation of positive characteristics (that is, willingness to exchange information frequently; sensitive parenting; good parental adjustment, support and respect for the other parent's role; and ability to resolve disagreements), the literature indicates that strong parental relationships in two homes are not detrimental for older children. Further research is necessary before we can have greater confidence in our knowledge of the implications of such arrangements for infants and toddlers. Yet, we are cautiously optimistic about the prospects of success of joint residential (as well as a range of other) arrangements for very young children in divorced families where parents are able to develop and maintain an effective caregiving system. Whereas few commentators would argue against the long-held presumption that children benefit from close, positive relationship with their mothers, research also shows that a good father-child relationship benefits the child's cognitive and social functioning and overall adjustment. Because of our society's gender stereotypes of parenting roles for men and women, fathers may have less direct experience with their young children and may find little support for prioritizing their children's needs ahead of career or social obligations. Parenting plans and intervention programs need to consider ways of promoting and supporting ongoing, close, and effective contacts with both parents.

Along similar lines, we note that a caregiving system with only one primary caregiver can also be successful. Research reveals that single mothers with adequate support, self-esteem, and effective parenting practices can provide a normal and positive home environment for young children whether or not the father is involved. And, although there exists little data on fathers with primary residential custody of infants, toddlers, or preschoolers postdivorce, we would expect, in light of the general research on father-child relationships, that single fathers could also provide satisfactory childrearing environments under similar circumstances.

Troubled Parenting

Hostile and continuing conflict between parents constitutes one of the most serious impediments to children's healthy postdivorce psychological adjustment. *No child is "too young to notice" parental conflict.* Even the youngest children are affected by a

negatively charged parenting environment. Continuing conflict between parents is linked to other powerful influences on children, such as lower maternal and paternal psychological functioning, less effective parenting techniques, lower levels of parental sensitivity to children's needs and feelings, lower levels of parental warmth, and parental inability to negotiate differences effectively. Helpful interventions for families must address all of these problems.

As suggested by the practitioners we interviewed, access schedules can be arranged to minimize the number of transitions children experience and amount of contact parents must have with one another. Schedules, however, although frequently a focus of intense parental dispute, are only a small part of the picture. Interventions also must address parenting practices, parental self-esteem, safe modes of information exchange, and ways of coping with disagreements. Decreasing time with the nonresidential parent is often not sufficient to handle the pervasive effects that difficulties in these areas have on children and their parents.

In planning schedules that include grandparent care, relationships within the extended family should be assessed with as much scrutiny as the parental relationships. Education for extended family members about effective ways to enable young mothers and fathers to function capably, and to support one another, may increase the child's access to both the mother's and the father's extended families. Strengthening coalitions between sets of grandparents might increase resources for the children.

To the extent court practitioners can help parents develop creative caregiving schedules that maximize parental caregiving while reducing children's time in nonparental care, they will help families begin to surmount a major obstacle in postdivorce parent-child relationships. That is, both parents usually must be employed, leaving little time for either to be with the children. In mediation, parents can be encouraged to develop solutions such as staggered work schedules to maximize the children's time in parental care.

We know that well-functioning divorcing couples can continue their successful parental alliance postdivorce. Also, those couples who are most dysfunctional before separation will most likely continue to have serious difficulties postdivorce and may further deteriorate in their functioning. However, the broad range of families in the

middle—the moderate-to-stressed, but not highly dysfunctional—couples may well be able to respond effectively to the challenge of developing constructive two-household parenting environments for their children. It is important to develop a variety of models for these families so that both parents can remain available to their children to the greatest extent possible and can have the professional and the community support they need to do this.

Parent education programs are likely to be most useful to the families characterized by low and moderate levels of conflict. Important content areas should include ways of increasing positive support to the other household; effective ways of exchanging information and coordinating routines across households; techniques of effective conflict resolution; and education about child developmental needs and effective parenting practices, as well as addressing parents' personal needs as adults. For example, parents may need to learn how to prepare the child for transitions between households in a manner that reduces the child's anxiety or distress, and reassures the child. The child needs to be reassured that parents support the child's relationship with both parents and trust in each other's parenting skills and competence. Additionally, families caught in chronic, high-level conflict need more powerful and comprehensive interventions.

The creation of positive parenting environments for the youngest children of divorce remains a significant challenge for parents and for the professionals with whom they come in contact. Clearly there is no template that will work for all—or even most—families. Divorcing parents and their children deserve the best of our creative and broad-minded attention, as they face the difficult task of navigating a field of complex, and often emotional, family relationships.

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